

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: MDT2013-0841

Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

MDT2013-0841

**Roman Ruins in Works by P. P.
Rubens: The Attribution of the *Three
Goddesses Disrobing***

Mika Yamaguchi

PhD Student

Leuven University

Belgium

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the
source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN 2241-2891

23/1/2014

An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Yamaguchi, M. (2013) "Roman Ruins in Works by P. P. Rubens: the Attribution of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MDT2013-0841.

**Roman Ruins in Works by P. P. Rubens:
The Attribution of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing***

**Mika Yamaguchi
PhD Student
Leuven University
Belgium**

Abstract

Drawings by Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck have sometimes been confused due to their similarities. For instance, the drawing, called *Three Goddesses Disrobing* has been attributed to Van Dyck. However, in this drawing, one finds the ruin of a Roman rotunda. Van Dyck did not use this motif but Rubens did so on several occasions. Rubens had an interest in Roman buildings and painted them in several of his paintings. It can be assumed that this Roman rotunda could have been dedicated to Venus. Each goddess' pose can be found in some of Rubens' paintings. Depicting such a group of three women was one of Rubens' favorite motifs. From the view of artist's style, the shape of branches in this drawing is unique. Above the hip of a cupid, a waved fork shaped branch is drawn. Branches with this shape are often painted in Rubens' paintings. Based on these facts, one should attribute this drawing not to Van Dyck but rather to Rubens.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) were seventeenth century Flemish masters. There is often confusion about the attribution of their works, with works by Rubens being attributed to Van Dyck and vice versa¹. In this paper, we discuss the attribution of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*. Among art historians, this drawing has traditionally been attributed to Anthony Van Dyck (**Fig. 1**). It was sold at Sotheby's as Van Dyck's drawing in 1946², Erik Larsen also attributed it to Van Dyck³. On the other hand, Fiona Healy consigned it to a gray zone but still referred to it as a 'Van Dyck' sketch⁴. J. Hedley discussed this drawing as being "drawn by Van Dyck" in 1999⁵. In this study, we will examine the attribution of this drawing by focusing on a Roman ruin in the drawing and the poses of goddesses.

Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *Three Goddesses Disrobing*, Oil on panel, private collection, England



¹There are several studies by scholars about the drawings of the two great masters. In 1932 L. Burchard argued that some of Rubens' drawings look like Van Dyck's drawings (Burchard 1932, 8-12). In 2001 A-M Logan tried to distinguish Van Dyck's drawing from Rubens' (Logan 2001, 7-28). That same year, A. Balis surmised that some of the drawings which were attributed to Rubens were in fact by Van Dyck (Balis 2001, 29-42). All of them admitted that some of the two masters' drawings resembled each other.

²Sotheby's, Walter Sale, 13 February 1946, lot 98.

³Larsen 1980, 91, note 54. In the explanation, he wrote this drawing was close to the *Wilhelmsen Judgement of Paris* (Larsen 1980, 88, No.56; Healy 1997, No. 119). The *Wilhelmsen Judgement of Paris* was attributed to Rubens by Healy (Healy 1999, 103-107).

⁴She mentioned this sketch with a quotation mark in her book; '*Van Dyck' sketch*. (Healy 1997, 106).

⁵Hedley 1999, 92.

This drawing represents the moment in which three women are taking off their clothes. Among Rubens' works, there are several subjects in which a comparable group of three women were painted¹. This scene in the drawing appears in the judgement of Paris as a well-known mythological theme². Three goddesses, Venus, Hera and Athena appeal to Paris with their beauty in order to win the honor of the most beautiful goddess. However, in this drawing, Paris and Mercury are absent. The draftsman concentrated on how to draw the three goddesses. Another object in this drawing is a Roman rotunda in the background on the left hand side.

Firstly, we will investigate in which paintings Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck painted Roman buildings. Secondly, we will study the pose of each goddess in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*. Thirdly, we will examine some of Rubens' traits of way of drawing.

Roman Rotunda

On the right hand side, there is a rotunda that is part of the background in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*. In some Rubens' paintings and drawings, a Roman rotunda is drawn in the background while Van Dyck is not known to have painted such Roman buildings.

The circular domed building is found in three of Rubens' works; They are the *Three Graces*, *Worship of Venus* and *Vulcan Forging the Thunderbolt*. In the *Three Graces*, now in the Dulwich picture gallery (**Fig. 2**), the three women who are the goddesses of joy, charm, and beauty³ take up most of the space. They dance a rondo with one of them raising her hand with a tambourine⁴. Just below the hand holding the tambourine, there is a Roman rotunda – a columnated circular building⁵ (**Fig. 5**). The building in this drawing⁶ is quite similar to the building in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* (**Fig. 4**). Furthermore, both buildings are situated in the background on the left side.

In the *Worship of Venus* by Rubens (**Fig. 3**) found in the Kunsthistorisches Museum⁷, a Roman rotunda was likewise painted (**Fig. 6**). In front of the building, there is an artificial cave and above this cave there is a

¹ For example, the *Education of Maria de' Medici*, *Three Graces*, *Cimon Falling in Love with Ifigenia*, *Cecrops' Daughters Discovering Erichthonius*.

² Van Dyck painted the scene of the *Judgement of Paris* preserved in Amsterdam (Vey 1962, Cat. No. 177). He was influenced by Marcantonio Raimondi's (c. 1480 Argine – c. 1534 Bologna) print, *Judgement of Paris*. The position of three goddesses and especially Hera's pose by Van Dyck is reminiscent Raimondi's work.

³ Their name is Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Thalia respectively.

⁴ This pose, a woman raising the hand with a tambourine can be found on the right hand side in the *Worship of Venus* which is preserved in the Museo del Prado. Rubens copied this painting which is preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

⁵ Held supposes that it might be for Venus, but he did not explain the reason (Held 1980, 327).

⁶ It is an oil sketch, mainly painted in a brown monotone with white highlights⁶ on the surface (Held 1980, Vol. 1, 326).

⁷ Wien 1963, Cat.no. 327.

niche containing a relief of a river god with a wolf. Given that a river god is associated with a nymphaeum, the cave must be for nymphs¹. Considering Venus' connection with nymphs, the circular domed building behind this artificial cave might be dedicated to her.

Figure 2. *Peter Paul Rubens, Three Graces Dancing, c. 1625-1628, oil on panel, 40 x 40cm, London, Dulwich College Picture Gallery.*



Figure 3. *Peter Paul Rubens, Worship of Venus, 1630s, oil on canvas, 217 x 350 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.*



¹For example, Nymphaeum in Rome (Piazzale di Villa Giulia 9, Rome, Italy), two statues of river gods made by Giacomo Vibnola (1507-1573) and Bartolomeo Ammannati (1511-1592) are placed http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_Giulia.

Figure 4. *Detail of Three Goddesses Disrobing*



Figure 5. *Detail of Three Graces Dancing*



Figure 6. *Detail of Worship of Venus.*



There is one more drawing attributed to Rubens where a rotunda is also to be found in the background. The theme of this drawing is also a mythological theme, *Vulcan Forging the Thunderbolt*. It belongs to a private collection and no picture of it has been published. Müller Hofstede and J. Held confirmed that this sketch is attributed Rubens¹.

¹Held 1980, Vol. 1, 627, Cat no. A7.

The Roman rotundas in these three works¹; *Three Goddesses Disrobing*, *Three Graces* and *The Worship of Venus* are quite similar: all buildings appear to be made of lime stones and are composed of many columns that support a dome shaped roof. They are all situated in the background on the left hand side, and the scenes of the three paintings are taken from mythological themes. From the connection between the building of the Nymphs and Venus in the *Worship of Venus*, one could conclude that these three buildings might be dedicated to Venus².

A. Blunt has argued that Rubens was inspired by a classical building by the hand of Giovanni Battista Montano (1534, Milan – 1621, Rome). Montano depicted Roman buildings in his engravings and Rubens borrowed this image for his paintings³. In his engraving, the rotunda might be referred by Rubens to draw the rotunda for Venus. Also, Tempietto of San Pietro by D. Bramante might have inspired Rubens to draw a temple dedicated to Venus.

Poses of the Goddesses in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*

Resemblances between Three Goddesses Disrobing and other works by Rubens

Now, Let us examine the poses of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*. The poses of the left and right side goddesses, resembles Rubens' *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius* in the Lichtenstein collection (**Fig. 7**). The scene depicted the three princesses as being surprised by an unexpected happening: The goddess Athena put the baby Erichthonius⁴ into a box and gave it to the three princesses⁵—who were daughters of Athens' legendary king, Cecrops. Though Athena warned them not to open the box, they⁶ opened it and as a result went insane. Rubens depicted this dramatic theme in two different

¹Circular Roman buildings were painted or drawn in other Rubens' paintings: In the *Deucalion and Phrrha* drawn by Rubens (Held 1980, Cat. No. 193) there is also a dome shaped building. Judging from the unique shape of rotunda and a railing on a cornice, that building must be inspired by the Tempietto of San Pietro (1502) by Donato Bramante (1444-1514). In the *Martyr of St. Catherine Alexandria* (Jaffé 1989, Cat.no. 291), *Martyr of St. Adrian* (Jaffé 1989, Cat.no. 292 and 293) and *Martyr of St. Chrysanthus* (Held 1980, Cat. No. 402) all by Rubens similar buildings are drawn or painted. In the first two paintings, there is a statue of Apollo in front of the building. In the third painting, there is a statue of Athena in front of the building. The idea of placing a statue in front of a Roman circular building was inspired from Rapaello's carton for a tapestry of the Sistina chapel (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/sep/03/raphael-sistine-tapestries-exhibition>). They are similar to the three paintings in question, but the slightly different style of building and their combination with a statue of either Apollo or Athena, means these buildings are not connected to Venus.

²About the circular domed building in the *Three Graces*, J. Held mentioned that (Held 1980, 327).

³For example, in the *Conclusion of Peace*, Rubens painted a building which Montano engraved (Blunt 1977, 613, Cat.no.14, 15).

⁴Erichthonius being born by Hephaestus' one-sided love towards Athena.

⁵Aglaulus, Herse and Pandrosus

⁶Precisely, they are Aglaulus and Herse.

paintings and several drawings¹. In the following chapter, we will have a look at the similarity of the women's poses in the *Three Goddesses* and in *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius*.

Figure 7. Peter Paul Rubens, *Cecrops' Daughters finding Erichthonius*, 218 × 317 cm, c. 1616, Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna



Comparing left hand side woman's pose in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* with those in the *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius*

In the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*, the left hand goddess stands on the left leg center of gravity and her right leg is crossed on the left knee. The daughter of Cecrops on the left is standing in a pose almost identical to the one in the *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius* in the Liechtenstein Museum, the only difference being that she is covering her private part (**Fig. 7, Fig. 12**). Through this gesture, a sense of foreboding is created²; She is about to look at the baby Erichthonius, and as a result, she will go insane.

There is a sketch of a nude woman taking the same pose in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (**Fig. 8**). Rubens appears to have sketched it for a mythological theme because on the same page there are women wearing classical clothes. In fact, he used this pose not only for the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* and the *Cecrops' daughters finding Erichthonius* but also for *Pan and Syrinx* (**Fig. 9**)³.

¹For the Lichtenstein collection, there is a preliminary oil sketch preserved in the Courtauld Gallery, London; <http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/gallery/09c68a4f.html>. In addition, there is a sketch attributed to Rubens by the Teylers Museum (preserved in the aforementioned museum <http://teylers.adlibhosting.com/internetserver/Details/kunst/52>) and an engraving by Pieter van Sompel (Also preserved in the Teylers Museum; <http://teylers.adlibhosting.com/internetserver/Details/kunst/33620#>) The different composition of the painting in Lichtenstein is in the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Ohio (The painting was cut in the 17th century, and now only a part of the painting is preserved; one of daughters is opening a box containing the infant Erichthonius and an old woman is surprised). There exists a preliminary oil sketch for this painting in the Stockholm National museum.

² Held 1976, 43.

³ This theme was painted by Hendrick van Balen in 1615. Rubens painted the same theme around 1617, after a few years, Jacques Jordaens and Abraham Janssen also painted it. (Brussels 2012, 76-77; Cat.no. 32-34)

Interestingly, in the compositional drawing of *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius* in the Coutauld Institute (**Fig. 10**) which was made to prepare for the Lichtenstein painting, a peacock is painted besides the right hand side daughter (**Fig. 11**). But in the final oil painting in the Lichtenstein museum, Rubens changed the position of the peacock to the background (**Fig. 12**). Through this change, he distinguished this work from another one where the peacock functioned as an attribute of Hera. He had, in fact, painted a peacock next to Hera in the 'Late' *Judgement of Paris* in the London National Gallery (**Fig. 13**). This suggests that Rubens employed the same woman's pose for several themes but tried to distinguish the character in each theme.

Figure 8. Peter Paul Rubens, *Daughters of Cecrops*, 1611-1616, Pen in brown on paper, 17.7 x 27.1 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Rijksprentenkabinet



Figure 9. Peter Paul Rubens, *Pan and Syrinx*, Oil on panel, 39 x 59.9cm (with added strips of wood: 40.3 x 61cm), c.1617, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel



Figure 10. *Peter Paul Rubens, Daughters of Cecrops discovering Erichthonius, c. 1615, Oil on panel, 41 x 50 cm (painted surface : 39.9 x 48.8 cm), The Courtauld Gallery, London*



Figure 11. *Detail of Daughters of Cecrops discovering Erichthonius in the Courtauld Gallery*



Figure 12. *Detail of Daughters of Cecrops discovering Erichthonius in the Liechtenstein Museum*



Figure 13. *Peter Paul Rubens, Judgement of Paris, 1632-1635, Oil on panel, 144.8 x 193.7 cm, National Gallery, London*



Comparing right hand side woman's pose in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* with those in the *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius*

In either paintings, the woman on the right, who shows us her back, look downwards to the left side. Her left arm is bent and the right arm is stretched back to hold clothes and hide their front. Rubens painted women in the same pose as this right hand goddess on several occasions, for example, in the *Judgement of Paris*, a work from early in his career in the London National Gallery (**Fig. 14**) and in a work with the same theme in the Prado Museum (**Fig. 15**).

Figure 14. Peter Paul Rubens, *Judgement of Paris*, c.1597-1599, Oil on Panel, 134 x 174.5cm, The National Gallery, London



Figure 15. Peter Paul Rubens, *Judgement of Paris*, 1639, Oil on Panel, 199 cm × 379 cm, Museu del Prado, Madrid



Middle goddess' pose in the Three Goddesses Disrobing

In the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*, the middle goddess raises her hands with the clothes as if she has just disrobed. The right arm is bent to take off the clothes and the left arm is stretched to pull them. A similar pose can be observed in *Perseus Liberating Andromeda* (**Fig. 16**) painted by Rubens. In this work, Andromeda bends the left arm and stretches the right arm to loosen a rope. Her pose is thus just a mirror image of the goddess in the middle of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*. Rubens also painted Andromeda in the *Perseus Freeing Andromeda* in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin as the same pose (**Fig. 17**). Athena, the left hand goddess among the three goddesses depicted, in the 'Late' *Judgement of Paris* in the National Gallery in London, likewise takes a similar pose (**Fig. 18**).

Figure 16. *Peter Paul Rubens, Perseus Liberating Andromeda, 1639-40, Oil on canvas, 160 x 265 cm Museo Del Prado, Madrid*



Figure 17. *Peter Paul Rubens, Perseus Freeing Andromeda, 1638, Oil on canvas, 189 cm x 94 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin*



Figure 18. *Peter Paul Rubens, The Judgement of Paris, c.1632-35, Oil on panel, 144,8 x 193,7 cm, The National Gallery, London*



The Shape of Branches

It is a part of a painter's style to paint and draw certain things a certain way. For example, one can distinguish the style of a painter by the way in which he depicts the branches of a tree. Rubens more seldomly painted the trees' foliage than did Van Dyck. Since he didn't paint many leaves, the branches can be seen more clearly. The branches sometimes come out from

opposite sides making ninety degrees angles and as they stretch out they make a twisted fork shape. Branches with such shapes can be seen just above of the angel who is helping Venus to take off the clothes in the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* (**Fig. 19**). These sinuous fork shaped branches with such shapes can often be seen in Rubens' paintings although the beech tree family is categorized alternate phyllotaxy branch. To give just three examples, from the *Worship of Venus* (**Fig. 20**), consider the left hand side tree's lowest part and the same tree's highest right hand side. We also can see this in the *Prodigal Son*¹ (**Fig. 21**), *Mercury and Argus*² (**Fig. 22**) etc.

Branches shaped in this way are not unique to works of Rubens but are also found in the work of other painters. I only found one case among Van Dyck's paintings (**Fig. 23**). In Rubens' paintings, on the other hand, we often find similar twisted fork shaped branches.

Figure 19. *Detail of Three Goddesses Disrobing*



Figure 20. *Detail of Worship of Venus.*



¹This painting was entirely by the hand of Rubens (Madrid 2012, 254).

²In the drawing, the fork waved shape branches are drawn (Fig. 19) and it doesn't change in the oil painting (Brussels 2007, Cat. No. 109, Cat. No. 97).

Figure 21. *Detail of Prodigal Son by Rubens*

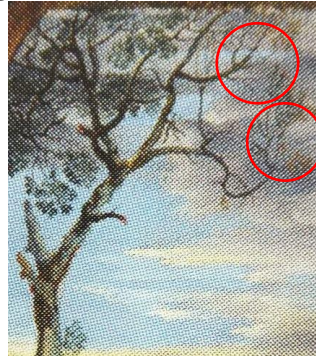


Figure 22. *Detail of Mercury and Argos by Rubens*



Figure 23. *Detail of St. Jerome in the Wilderness by Van Dyck*



Conclusion

In Van Dyck's works, there is no painting or drawing where a Roman circular building was depicted while in Rubens' works, we could find several such rotundas. Rubens depicted these buildings in a slightly different manner in accordance with each theme.

In the *Three Goddesses Disrobing*, there are several elements which Rubens painted frequently: They are the Roman rotunda and the group of three women. What they have common is that the circular domed buildings and these particular women's poses are mostly found in his mythological works. By placing the peacock in different places between in either the drawing and the painting of *Cecrops' Daughters Finding Erichthonius*, Rubens paid attention to where symbolical elements should best be introduced. Considering the association between nymphs and Venus in the *Worship of Venus*, this building is related to Venus. As this drawing depicts a scene from a mythological theme, the *Judgement of Paris*, in which Venus becomes the winner among the

three goddesses, the Roman rotunda dedicated to Venus is suitable for this scene.

Examining this drawing with an eye for the style of artist to paint and draw certain things, a sinuous fork shaped branch is distinctive. They are often seen in Rubens' paintings but very rarely in Van Dyck's.

Having considered the motifs, the poses of the goddesses and manner of depicting the branches, it seems that the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* is not by Van Dyck's hand but rather a work by Rubens. As this drawing is preserved in a private collection, I can unfortunately not investigate the actual drawing. To make a final decision on the attribution of this drawing, it would require precise examination with my own eyes. Following such a close investigation, the attribution of the *Three Goddesses Disrobing* could finally be resolved conclusively.

Bibliography

- Balis 2001 A. Balis. "Van Dyck's Drawings after the Antique." *Van Dyck 1599-1999: Conjectures and Refutations*. Ed. H. Vlieghe, 2001:29-42.
- Blunt 1977 Anthony Blunt. "Rubens and Architecture." *The Burlington Magazine*. Vol. 119, No. 894.
- Brussels 2007 *Rubens: A Genius at Work*, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.
- Brussels 2012 *Jordaens: and the Antique*. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.
- Burchard 1932 "Rubens ähnliche Van Dyck Zeichnungen." *Sitzungsberichte der kunstgeschichtlichen Gesellschaft Berlin*. Oktober 1931 bis Mai 1932: 8-12. [in German].
- Healy 1997 F. Healy. *Rubens and the Judgement of Paris : a question of choice*. Turnhout : Brepols, 1997
- Held 1980 J. S. Held. *The oil sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: a critical catalogue*. 2 vols, Princeton.
- Jaffé 1968 M. Jaffé. "Rubens in Italy Part II." *The Burlington Magazine*. Vol. 110, No. 781, 172, 174-187.
- Larsen 1980 E. Laersen. *Van Dyck: 1613-1626*. Vol. 1, Milano. [in Italian].
- Logan 2001 A-M. Logan. "Distinguishing the Drawings by Anthony van Dyck from those of Peter Paul Rubens." *Van Dyck 1599-1999: Conjectures and Refutations*. Ed. H. Vlieghe, 2001: 7-28.
- London 1999 *Van Dyck: At the Wallace Collection*. The Wallece Collection, by J. Hedley.
- Madrid 2012 *The Young Van Dyck*. Ed. A. Vergara and F. Lammertse, Museo National del Prado, Madrid.
- Müller-Hofstede 1965 J. Müller-Hofstede. "Zeichnungen des Späten Rubens." *Pantheon*, XXIII. München: 163-180. [in German].
- New York 2004 *Peter Paul Rubens: The Drawings*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anne-Marie Logan collaboration with Michiel C. Plomp.
- Vey 1962 H. Vey. *Die Zeichnungen Anton van Dycks*. 2 vols, Brüssel. [in German].